

[The Raising of the Widow's Son at Nain. Luther: "*THIS IS SAID ON TODAY'S GOSPEL, IN WHICH WE SEE HOW GOD HELPS AND SAVES US, MOVED BY PURE GRACE AND LOVINGKINDNESS, WITHOUT ANY MERIT OR WORTHINESS WHATEVER ON OUR PART, YEA, BEFORE WE SEEK OR REQUEST HELP FROM HIM. GOD GRANT THAT WE MAY BELIEVE THIS!*"]

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity; Luke 7:11-17

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil.

THE RAISING OF THE WIDOW'S SON AT NAIN

I. THE MIRACLE ITSELF.

1. In this Gospel you see how the Evangelist again presents to us a divine miracle, by which he desires to move us to lift our hearts to God, in which is the same state of things as at the time existed in this woman; for today's lesson was not written for the sake of this widow, but for the instruction and help of all who should hear this Gospel until the end of the world, among whom we also have been reckoned.

2. In the first place notice what lovingkindness and grace were shown to this woman by Christ. We must truly confess she did not merit them; for she is going out of the city with her friends, where there is nothing but crying and weeping. The good woman thought of nothing as little as that she should again lead back her son into the city alive, and for this reason she does not desire it, nor does she ask it, much less has she deserved it. She never thought of such a thing that Christ should come hither; yea, she did not at the time know Christ nor did she know anything of his helping the people. Here all merit and preparations for meeting him are out of the question.

3. Now all this has been written to the end that just as here this deed of mercy befell this widow freely and entirely of grace, only because it solicited Christ's sympathy, so from this we can draw the general rule that applies to all the merciful deeds of God, that they all overtake us without our merits, even before we seek them. He lays the foundation and makes the beginning. But why does he pity us? In this way it continues to be the grace of God. Otherwise, if we deserved it, it would not be grace. And if it be of grace, then we can say to him: Thou art a gracious God, thou doest good also to them who deserve it not.

4. This sermon seems easy to us, but where are they who mean it with their heart? If we believed

that everything comes to us from God's grace and mercy, we would daily run and rejoice, our hearts would continually rise and dwell in heaven. When we once get to heaven we will see that this is true. Now no one believes it. The god of this world, the devil, has such great power on earth that we do not see the work of God nor know it. 2 Cor. 4, 4. Therefore we do not appreciate it, we misuse God's mercies, and are entirely unthankful to him.

5. If I only kept in mind that he gave me eyes, truly a very great treasure, it would be no wonder if shame caused my death, because of my ingratitude in that I never yet thanked him for the blessing of sight. But we do not see his noble treasures and gifts; they are too common. But when a blind babe happens to be born, then we see what a painful thing the lack of sight is, and what a precious thing even one eye is, and what a divine blessing a healthy, bright countenance is; it serves us during our whole life, and without it one would rather be dead; and yet no one thanks God for it. Examine the entire body, and you will everywhere see traces of God's grace and goodness. Hence Psalm 33, 5 says: "The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord." He had pure eyes and could see far, that the whole world was full of the goodness and lovingkindness of God. From whom, however, has this goodness come? Have we deserved it? No, but it pleased God to cast his gifts thus promiscuously into the world, which the unthankful receive almost as freely as the thankful. We are grieved when we are obliged to throw away one or two dollars, or less, or even to give them to the poor; how much does God daily cast away of his goods into the world and no one thanks him for anything? Yes, who even acknowledges their receipt?

6. Thus we may observe all creatures and become convinced of God's goodness in them. Christ says in Mat. 5, 45: "He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." As though he would say: I give it to the whole crowd; but who thanks me a single time for it? He enlightens my and your eyes, but no one acknowledges that it is God's blessing. If some morning the sun should not rise, or rise three hours late, what distress and loss would that cause? How we would open our mouths and eyes? Then everyone would say: God be praised and thanked, who has given us such a light! But since it occurs daily, that the sun rises and shines at the appointed time, no one considers it a blessing. So it is with the rain from heaven, with the grain in the field and with all God's creatures. They exist in such abundance, and we are daily so overwhelmed by their abundance that we fail to see them.

7. At times God permits some man to fall into anxiety and need, into pain and distress, so that the world seems as though it had no God, and it makes a person blind, lame, dropsical, and lets anyone die, as here the widow's son; for they are his creatures, he can do with them what he will. Now, why does he do this? He does it in such an abundance only that we may continually experience his lovingkindness. Therefore as the disciples in John 9, 2 asked the Lord concerning the man blind from his birth, whether he or his parents sinned, the Lord answered and said: "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents ; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him." As though he would say: God desires to be praised in this blind person, for he sees that the treasures of the whole world do not move us, wherefore he floods us with his goodness out of pure grace, that he may present a blind person before our eyes, for us to see what a costly treasure we have in the blessing of our sight, although we cannot recognize his grace and kindness in our fortune, that we at least might know and identify them then in our misfortune. Therefore this man had to be blind in order that the others might know themselves, and say: Alas thou good God, what a precious gift I have, what a

good thing a healthy body is and a bright countenance! But no one takes it to heart! Yea, it is true we say: have not the cows eyes also! Now, if you were blind you would of course feel the loss, which you do not now feel, because you are well and overshadowed with God's blessings.

8. So it was in the case of this widow, in whom God lets himself be known, as to what kind of a God he is, what he thinks of us, and what we must think of him. This woman has two misfortunes around her neck. First, she is a widow. This is misfortune enough for one woman, that she is forsaken and alone, and has no one to whom she dare look for comfort. And therefore God in the Scriptures is often mentioned as the Father of the widow and orphans, as in Ps. 68, 6 and 146, 9: "God setteth the solitary in families. The Lord preserveth the strangers and orphans, he delivers the widow." Again: she has an only son about to die, who should have been her comfort. Now, God comes and takes away her husband and son. She had much better have lost house and home, yes, her own life, than her son and husband. But the Lord turns it around. While the husband lived the woman did not appreciate what a blessing a husband was; but when he died she first became aware of it. When he lived, she thought: O, other women have husbands, too! And thought her husband was like other husbands. But afterwards when he was dead, she became aware what kind of a man she had lost. So, too, when her son was bright and well, she did not appreciate the blessing of God, but as soon as he died, she then first saw what a treasure she had lost. Before she did not desire to spend on him; but now, since he is dead, she spends all she has and even herself upon him. And thus it is also with us. There are many of you who do not expend ten dollars that your child may be reared better; if the child dies the parents wish and say: O would to God he were alive, I would give many hundred dollars! Why did you not give something before that he might have learned a little? What is the reason you do not appreciate the grace and blessings of God? In short, the world remains world, and it will not change into anything else.

9. Now, the woman went ahead and did not know what God had given her; but she was soon obliged to experience it. For before she turns around, and she thinks she is the safest, God comes, tries the wife a little and teaches her certain things, takes her husband and her son, This all has been written for us that we might have an example and learn to acknowledge God when he blesses us with a healthy body, a bright countenance, and bestows upon us other blessings. He does not give them to the end that you should rejoice in them; but that you may know what to think of him. When he takes a member out of your family, permits your wife to die, or destroys one of your eyes, all this is done that you may see what you have enjoyed from him.

10. And this is now the common teaching through all the Gospels, that we may see what kind of a God we have. It is also shown us here in this Gospel that God will forsake no one; therefore he permits the wife to see in a new light what kind of a God she has. For when she was forsaken and had neither son nor husband, then Christ manifests himself to her and says: Learn to believe, trust God, know him to whom death and life are alike: have a good heart, be of good courage, weep not, there is no need of it. He then goes and awakens the dead, and gives him again to his mother.

11. This and like miracles God does that the heart may learn how it should be disposed to him and what it may expect from him. As now this wife was fully convinced that there was no hope for her son, that it was impossible for her to receive him back alive again; yea, if one had said to her:

Before an hour your son will be alive again, she would have regarded it as impossible and said: It is more possible for the heavens to fall than for my son to live again. Behold, here comes God before she looks around, and does what she never dared to ask of him, as it is impossible, and he restores her son alive to her again.

But why does God do this? He permits man to fall so deeply into danger and anxiety, until no help or advice is within reach, and still he desires that we should not doubt, but trust in him who out of an impossible thing can make something possible, and make something out of nothing. If you are so deep in sin that your heart denies you all grace and the mercy of God and makes you think there is no hope for you, as many consciences are ensnared by such anxiety and distress; then turn about and look here how friendly and graciously God allows himself to be pictured by Christ in this Gospel; that you may observe that he means it well with you from his heart; and that he is not here either to condemn or excommunicate you, but to preserve your soul forever. For this purpose such miracles and wonderful works are held before our eyes, and they also serve to the end, that we may see. As God here helps this widow in a temporal way through Christ, so he will help us not only bodily, but much more spiritually, and our soul forever, if we only put our hope in him.

12. But all miracles and works of God are considered impossible in our eyes, and they are also impossible for the natural man to grasp; and this is to the end that God may be confessed to be an almighty Creator, who from something impossible can create something possible, and can make something out of nothing. It is impossible after I am dead that I should live again; and even if I should pray to all the angels and all the saints for it; nothing will result from such prayers; what then can the free will accomplish? Nevertheless in death I should say: I shall live, not through myself, but because I know that my God is so skilful that he can make something, not out of wood that lies before my eyes, but it is his nature and way to make a thing possible here from something impossible; and create something out of nothing; otherwise he were not the true and real God.

13. Therefore, if death be present and I can no longer live, I must still know enough to say: Yet I live, and will live; so that death, that is all about me, is like a spark of fire, and life is as great as the sea. Now reason cannot grasp how this takes place. But whoever believes, knows for a certainty that to him death will be like a spark of fire in the midst of the ocean, that is extinguished in a moment. God is almighty, he who believes is in God, therefore he is in life, and though he were in the midst of death. So too a poor person who believes, thinks like this one here in death: O! poverty is a spark of fire, and wealth is as abundant as water in the sea; now a moment only is needed for poverty to sink, and I will be rich; for by faith God has entirely changed him who now has all things in his power. So also with shame; when one's good name and reputation go down, people think they will never again be regained; if you believe and hold to God, it is a matter only of a moment, and you are again in great honour. For our God knows the art that from invincible poverty he can create great riches, from great shame inexpressible honour. So it is also with sin, if you believe. Thus sin compared with righteousness, is as a spark of fire compared with the whole sea of water.

14. This you see beautifully illustrated in the case of this woman. She is overwhelmed by exceedingly great pain and anguish, so that she thinks God, heaven, earth and all things are opposed to her. And since she looks into this with the eyes of sense, sees it as it is before her natural eyes, she must conclude it is impossible for her to be delivered from her great anxiety. But when her son was raised from the dead for her, she was as though the whole heaven and earth, wood and stone,

and everything laughed and rejoiced with her; then she forgot all pain and suffering, this wholly disappeared just like a spark of fire is extinguished when it falls into the sea. Therefore it is written in the prophet Isaiah

54, 6-8: "For Jehovah hath called thee as a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, even a wife of youth when she is cast off, saith thy God. For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In overflowing wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting lovingkindness will I have mercy on thee, saith Jehovah thy Redeemer." But this I do not see, I think this moment is an eternal something before God; but it is in truth only a moment; and much joy follows as Psalm 8, 5 also says: "For thou hast made him but little lower than God, and crownest him with glory and honour." But this is still all hid from us, and we do not see it as this wife does. Her departed son is in the midst of life, for God has him in his bosom, and intends to wake him. There is a spark of death there that surrounds him, which no one saw. But now when he became alive that was revealed which before was hidden from the whole world.

15. Thus God certainly deals also with us. Here we should learn the kind of God we have, namely, he who surrounds us and is about us in our very greatest dangers and troubles. Therefore, if one is poor, sticks deep in sin, lies in death, is in sorrows and other afflictions, he thinks: it is a transition state, it is a drop and a spark; for God has surrounded him on all sides with pure wealth, righteousness, life and joy, only he does not permit him to see it. But it is a matter of only a little time when we shall see and enjoy it. Thus you have here an example, not of faith, but of the pure grace and lovingkindness of God. Now we must also say a little on the spiritual understanding or the allegorical interpretation of today's Gospel.

II. THE SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION OF THIS MIRACLE.

16. All works and miracles that Christ does visibly and publicly should be interpreted to the end that they may show forth the works which he does among men unseen and spiritually or within them. Therefore this bodily death signifies the spiritual death of the soul, which man must believe. For no one can see into the soul of another while we live; but when we are dead, we then have other eyes, then we see that the whole world is dead. Therefore the Lord spoke to a Pharisee,

Mat. 8, 22, who first wanted to go and bury his father: "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

17. This youth who is here being borne to his grave is bodily dead. But there are also some inwardly dead before God who still live here in the body. The soul is dead that does not believe in God and cleave to him. And even though he be in the midst of death, yet he lives, as I said above.

18. This spiritual death occurs in a twofold manner: some are dead in their soul, but no one sees that death as we see bodily death, and this woman herself neither sees nor feels it. So the whole world is dead, but it realizes it not. Therefore some are also spiritually dead, who feel it well enough, as those whom the law has terribly punished. We do not here speak of those who care nothing for spiritual death; but of those who feel that they are dead and that their heart trembles, and who feel in

their conscience that they have an unbelieving heart. He is dead quite otherwise than he who does not feel it, and yet always lives in wantonness. Now the one who does not experience their unbelief cannot be helped, for he does not know his sickness, and lives on, cares nothing for God nor the world. But he who feels this death, suffers misery and distress, there is struggling and despair, the world becomes too confined for him, he seeks assistance and advice, he despises neither stone nor wood, when they can afford him counsel, not to say that he should hear anything of man, even of the most insignificant person.

19. Who now gives him this feeling. The law does it, in that it reveals sin. The law says: "Thou shalt have no other gods." When I hear this, I must and should do it, but I cannot. Then I quickly conclude that I am condemned. When I act thus, death comes immediately and there is such a struggle in my heart, that if I should receive no help I would have to remain forever in this death and struggle. This then is the death of the only son, who lies in the bier, the pallbearers are continually carrying him into hell.

20. The pallbearers are the preachers of the law, who do nothing else than plunge mankind ever deeper and deeper into death; as those here hasten to the grave with the dead they are the more terrified and driven the deeper into perdition. It never becomes better with mankind, yea, it is ever growing worse.

21. This we have thoroughly experienced under the Pope, in our confession of and in our making satisfaction for sin. We allowed ourselves to think we would atone for our sins by good works; but it was only an anxiety of the conscience. Thus we ever sank deeper toward hell. Hence, when you have people, who fear sin and condemnation, they are already dead, you dare not preach to these much more of the law, you must show them the way of salvation and preach to them the Gospel. When our Papists meet such troubled souls, they refer them to rosaries, to pilgrimages, to this and that work; but one helps like the other.

22. The pallbearers would have still moved on and laid the deceased in his grave and buried him, had Christ not come, so Christ must come also here with his Word and grace. And this now is that other office of the Gospel, which does not teach what you are to do; but whence you are to receive help, that you may do it; as Christ does here. He asks not, what is here? or how do you do this? do you wish to have the youth restored to life again, and the like? He asks none of these things; but he has mercy on the mother, goes to her, touches the bier, and the bearers soon stand still. That is, when man preaches the goodness of God, and when Christ presents us with his merits and works, then the hand is laid upon the coffin, and the bearers stand still, that is, you no longer hear the preachers of the law, you no longer believe them; but you say: preach works here, preach works there, we have a different Sermon. While our hands are on the coffin they accomplished nothing; the dead does not come to life again; but when Christ's hand touches the coffin the mighty work is done. For when men hear that Christ's work does it, and that his works are presented to us, he says: What need we to do beside? For here our doing is useless and in vain.

23. But the dead will not be raised to life so quickly. The Word of God is of course preached to us, the goodness of God and whatever is given us through Christ; but this is not yet sufficient, this is

only first touching the coffin. The voice of Christ in the heart must also be added, that we may believe the Word, that it is really as we preach. The youth does not immediately arise after he is touched, but when the Lord spoke: "Young man, I say unto thee, Arise!" This voice stirred the heart and caused the dead to rise to life. When I in like manner hear the Word, and allow human traditions to move me, men still bear me ever on and I ever remain in distress, it helps me little. I must besides the external sermon also hear this voice in the heart: "Young man, I say unto thee, Arise:" that is, I must believe this sermon, cleave to it with my heart, trust in it, and let neither sin, death, devil, nor hell draw me from it.

24. Thus we have two sermons. One lays the hand on the bier. This does not yet accomplish anything. But the other, when the hand is laid on the coffin and the voice follows in the heart, this accomplishes all. The first proclaims to us the works of Christ, how they are done for us and given to us. But when the voice is heard in the heart, then the one who was before dead begins to speak and to confess the faith with his mouth which he believes and feels in his heart. That is, when the heart believes, the work of love follows, namely, that you speak, that is, preach to others and thank God for the blessing and faith he has shown and given unto you.

25. From this follows great joy and thanksgiving, by which God is praised and exalted; just as here a great report about Christ went over the entire land of the Jews and into all the neighbouring countries. Thus a Christian can lead many unto faith. Therefore man should not make a work of jugglery out of miracles and wonders, as the Papists have done.

26. This is said on today's Gospel, in which we see how God helps and saves us, moved by pure grace and lovingkindness, without any merit or worthiness whatever on our part, yea, before we seek or request help from him. God grant that we may believe this!

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